

RICHMOND NEWS-LEADER (VA)
1 January 1983

Police believe Lawler may have known killer

Former City Councilman John Edward Lawler may have known the person who bludgeoned him to death Thursday night, Richmond police said today. Furthermore, he apparently tried frantically to escape his attacker, officers said.

Lawler, 76, who served on council from 1956 to 1960 and was a prominent lawyer and former agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was found lying on his side in the kitchen of his brick ranch home at 5011 Riverside Drive yesterday about 10:30 a.m.

Police said Lawler had been beaten on the head severely and repeatedly with a blunt object.

Police said they have not found the murder weapon. Police also said they do not believe anything is missing from the home. However, they declined to rule out robbery as a motive.

Acquaintances of Lawler told police that Lawler, divorced for several years, led a busy social life and was "quite active" in his work and private life.

Detectives said acquaintances described Lawler as well-liked throughout the community and with "few, if any, enemies."

Detectives said there is a possibility that Lawler "knew whoever it was" who killed him and "frantically resisted" the killer's efforts to beat him.

Two workmen, who police said had appeared at the home to talk with Lawler about employment, discovered the body.

Police said blood was found "in many places" in the living room and in the kitchen of the home. They said objects in the home had been turned over and broken, indicating that Lawler apparently had resisted and tried to flee his attacker.

"It looks like there was some kind of fight or chase," one detective said.

However, police said they found no sign of forced entry, and they said Lawler's attacker already may have been in the home or was admitted by Lawler himself. They said the rear door of the home was open when they arrived.

Police said the state medical examiner's office will attempt to determine

the exact cause and time of death.

Detectives said they are interviewing neighbors who knew Lawler and people who attended a party at his home Thursday evening. They said the party apparently drew a "pretty good crowd" and lasted until "the early hours of Friday."

Police said cars were seen arriving at the home and leaving late Thursday night and early yesterday.

One detective said, "We can't be sure of anything at this point, but we have to talk with the people who were at the party. They were the ones who were there last (before the slaying)."

Detectives also said they believe Lawler's attacker "probably knew his habits and that he lived alone."

They said neighbors were concerned because Lawler's home had been broken into "a few times" in recent years.

Detectives said persons questioned so far reported last seeing Lawler Thursday about 6 p.m., when he left the Commonwealth Club and apparently went home. The policemen said Lawler frequently ate and played cards at the club at 401 W. Franklin St.

Lawler was a native of Mobile, Ala., where he earned his bachelor's degree at Spring Hill College. He received his law degree from Georgetown University, and joined the FBI in 1935.

Lawler worked as an administrative assistant to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and worked as a security system director for the bureau during World War II. He also served as the agent in charge of the bureau's Richmond office. He resigned from the bureau in 1950 and took a job with Union Life Insurance Co., with which he still was affiliated at the time of his death.

Lawler was appointed to council to fill the unexpired term of Dr. Edward E. Haddock in 1956. Lawler resigned in 1960 after having been elected to council twice.

Early last year, Lawler told The Richmond News Leader he had been affiliated with the Central Intelligence Agency for some time when he took the seat on council.

Lawler said he had begun accepting assignments from the CIA soon after he retired from the FBI in 1950. He said one of his CIA jobs was running a phony research organization here that served as a front for a CIA training and payroll operation.

"I did it as a patriotic citizen," Lawler said.

Lawler is survived by a son, John E. Lawler Jr. of Kilmarnock, and two daughters, Florence Crowder and Frances P. Lawler, both of Richmond.

Funeral arrangements were incomplete.